DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 326 998 EA 022 586

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TITLE Heterogeneous Grouping in Middle Level Schools: Leadership Responsibilities for Principals. Schools in the Middle: A Report on Trends and Practices.
INSTITUTION National Association of Secondary School Principals, Reston, Va.
REPORT NO ISSN-0276-4482
PUB DATE Jan 90
NOTE 5p.; Colored print in section headings, on gray paper, may not film adequately. For related documents, see EA 022 587-588.
AVAILABLE FROM Publications, National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1904 Association Drive, Reston, VA 22091 ($1.50; quantity discounts).
PUB TYPE Collected Works - Serials (022)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Cooperative Learning; *Heterogeneous Grouping; Homogeneous Grouping; Intermediate Grades; Junior High Schools; *Leadership Responsibility; Middle Schools; *Principals; Program Development; Track System (Education)

ABSTRACT

Given that grouping students homogeneously has proved to be more deleterious than beneficial to student learning and self-concept, principals of middle level schools have the responsibility to implement more heterogeneous grouping arrangements in their schools. Grouping programs that provide multiple criteria for determining student ability and adequate guidance for students selecting courses and that do not lend themselves to a schoolwide grouping pattern are more likely to meet the variety and multiplicity of early adolescents' intellectual and developmental needs. The successful implementation and continuation of more heterogeneous grouping arrangements in any middle level school hinges on the principal's ability to identify the short-range and long-range skills necessary for the full realization of the new program and to provide staff members with adequate, ongoing training in those skill areas. Cooperative learning has emerged as one effective and constructive instructional strategy applicable to heterogeneous grouping arrangements, yet teachers will need extensive education and skill development in this area if students are to reap the anticipated benefits. The first step toward a successful heterogeneous grouping program in the middle level school is for principals and staff to collaborate and develop a timeline for the provision of necessary instructional skills. (13 references) (CLA)

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January 1990 National Association of Secondary School Principals ISSN 0276 4482

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EA 022 586

# Heterogeneous Grouping in Middle Level Schools: Leadership Responsibilities for Principals

By Conrad F. Toepfer, Jr.

Middle level schools continue to wrestle with grouping issues. When schools view grouping as either a philosophy or a strategy, grouping arrangements become inflexible structures that classify students into closed settings for learning.

When philosophic issues and strategic needs interface, grouping can establish better learning and personal development environments in schools.

The fundamental purpose of grouping should be to place students in settings that best meet their learning needs. During the past two decades, homogeneous grouping by ability and tracking arrangements have become more popular in schools. However, the results of homogeneous grouping of students by ability do not warrant its continued use, particularly in middle level school programs.

George (1988) noted "tracking does not deliver consistently favorable results for any group of students" and "the effects of tracking on individuals, or classroom groups, affectively is often powerfully negative." In reviewing a select sample of 154 of what were reputedly some of the nation's best middle level schools, George concluded "virtually all of the outstanding middle schools surveyed placed students in heterogeneously grouped interdisciplinary teams."

Democratic society requires that people be able to function in the least restrictive environments possible. More heterogeneous grouping provides opportunities for students to learn in widening developmental ranges. Such arrangements allow movement toward greater heterogeneity. This is more natural and realistic than limiting learning opportunities within homogeneously ability-grouped frames.

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Neither completely heterogeneous nor homogeneous approaches deal responsively with the developmental variance among young adolescents. Certain central principles should be considered in identifying and developing grouping arrangements appropriate for use in middle level schools.

- Grouping arrangements should best meet early adolescent developmental needs. Effective groupings depend to a large extent on adequate guidance in helping pupils select courses and cocurricular activities suited to their abilities and interests.

- Subgrouping on bases of ability, achievement, or interest within classes in a specific area is more justifiable than grouping on the basis of general intelligence. Use of any single limited grouping arrangement on a schoolwide basis in middle level schools should be avoided.

- Many criteria for determining pupil learning capacities should be utilized. Previous performance in a subject and specific evaluations of readiness should also be considered. Teachers' estimates should be included and reliance upon a single test score should be avoided.

- The merits of ability, achievement, and interest must be clearly defined as they relate to grouping needs in specific areas of middle level school programs.

In view of such principles, J. Howard Johnston and Glenn Markle (1986) reported the following in their review of research on grouping in middle level schools.

> The practice of grouping students by ability for instructional purposes is not supported by research. Even though a majority of teachers believes that abili-

ty grouping improves the effectiveness of schooling, the studies reviewed suggest that the practice has deleterious effects on teacher expectations and instructional practices (especially for students in lower ability groups), student perceptions of self and others, and academic performance of lower ability students.

Ability grouping interferes with opportunities for students to learn from — and learn to accept — peers of different socioeconomic backgrounds, and may perpetuate notions of superior and inferior classes of citizens. The practice is especially antithetical to the goals and objectives of the middle school. (p. 57)

### The Case Against Homogeneous Grouping by Ability

In the January 1989 *ASCD Curriculum Update*, Robert Slavin gave the following response to this question: "The sorting of students into ability groups has come under increasing fire recently. Should schools end the practice of grouping students by ability?"

A decision to assign a child to an ability group or track will have far-reaching consequences, as grouping decisions made at one point in a child's school experience greatly influence later grouping decisions.

Students assigned to lower groups or tracks are less likely to graduate or go on to college than students of the same ability assigned to higher tracks. Their teachers have lower expectations for them and may teach at too slow a pace. In integrated schools, tracking usually creates racially identifiable groups, which can create inequities along racial or ethnic lines. For these reasons, grouping by ability should be avoided as much as possible and used only where there is clear educational justification.

There are several situations when grouping may be justified. At the elementary level, there is no research to suggest any benefit of between-class ability grouping, but within-class grouping (i.e., reading and math groups within the class) can be beneficial. There is research supporting the Joplin Plan, in which students are grouped for reading according to reading level but regardless of age. *At the middle school level there is still no known benefit to ability grouping* but acceleration programs for mathematically talented students may be effective. High school students should be able to choose courses according to their interests and skills, but counselors must be careful to avoid steering students into low ability courses. While ability grouping may sometimes be necessary, we should avoid it as much as possible.

Student learning capacities change more rapidly and more often during their middle level school years than in either elementary or high school. To improve early adolescent intellectual development and achievement, middle level schools must identify the kinds, degrees, and ranges of diversity in ability, achievement, interest, and social development that will create the most effective learning environments. No single pattern will fit all situations. The challenge is to move away from set patterns that lock students into fixed homogeneous arrangements for the semester or the school year.

The Carnegie Task Force on the Education of Young Adolescents' *Turning Points: Preparing Youth for the 21st Century* (Hornbeck, 1989) clearly endorses the need to move away from tracking and homogeneous grouping by ability.

Tracking has proven to be one of the most divisive and damaging school practices in existence. Time and time again, young people placed in lower academic tracks or classes, often during the middle grades are locked into dull, repetitive instructional programs leading at best to minimum competencies. The psychic numbing these youth experience from a "dumbed-down" curriculum contrasts sharply with the exciting opportunities for learning and critical thinking that students placed in higher tracks or classes may experience. (pp. 49-59)

### Leadership Tasks in Widening Grouping Arrangements

How can middle level school principals successfully implement more heterogeneous grouping arrangements in their schools? The initial task is to avoid past leadership mistakes in dealing with innovations. The second is to develop approaches on successful implementation of more heterogeneous grouping procedures.

Like the legendary "graveyard of the elephants," there also is a "graveyard of unsuccessful educational innovations." Although well thought-out in theory and successful practice, many promising innovations subsequently failed in many schools. In those cases cynics were invariably moved to observe "there goes another pie-in-the-sky idea."

However, some schools continue to use these innovations with great success. Why? The answer appears to be that those schools took the time to develop specific staff development/inservice experiences that provided staff members with the skills needed to successfully implement that innovation. An example of this can be seen in current re-examination of schools that have continued multi-age grouping and non-graded organizational procedures (Cohen, 1989a and 1989b).

As new or reorganized school programs are planned and developed, both short and long-range implications of skills necessary to implement these programs must be clearly iden-

tified. Decisions regarding immediate and subsequent skills teachers will need to implement newly developed school programs successfully must be carefully studied.

If initiated before teachers develop such necessary skills, an innovation will not achieve its instructional improvement potential. For example, core curriculum approaches continue to be very effective in middle level schools in which teachers gained and continue to acquire the skills to deliver effective core curriculum programs.

In the past, few college or university preservice teacher education programs provided teachers with the skills necessary to implement core programs. In like manner, most schools did not provide staff development/inservice experiences that prepared teachers to successfully implement core curriculum approaches.

While many schools quickly embraced the core curriculum concept, few bothered to equip teachers with the skills needed to introduce the program. Core programs staffed by teachers who lacked these skills fared poorly. Those schools subsequently discarded the programs after unsatisfactory results and erroneously dismissed core curriculum as a poorly thought-out educational fad.

Core curriculum was, and remains, conceptually and practically sound. Its lack of success in the circumstances described can be traced to leaders who erroneously assumed that teachers who lacked necessary skills could successfully implement the innovation. Realistically, neither brain surgery nor educational innovations can be effectively self-taught! Adequate staff development experiences are prerequisite to introducing more heterogeneous grouping arrangements in middle level schools.

## Preparing To Implement Heterogeneous Grouping Arrangements

Today's middle level school teachers do not possess the skills needed to successfully implement more heterogeneous grouping arrangements. Preservice teacher education programs must respond to this critical concern. However, principals must work with staff members to develop skills needed to successfully move away from homogeneous grouping by ability and tracking approaches.

While we may embrace the rhetoric to move toward more heterogeneous grouping arrangements in middle level schools, two caveats must be recognized:

- First, subscribing to a concept in itself does not equip one with the skills needed to deliver that concept in practice.

- Second, while teachers may agree intellectually with the need to change from homogeneous grouping, unless they gain the skills to do otherwise, they will return to their classrooms and teach the only way they know how.

Principals must provide leadership to enable staff members to gain the skills to successfully implement more heterogeneously grouped arrangements. By default, regression toward the mean of tracking will occur if heterogeneous grouping approaches are inadequate.

In a recent interview on the Carnegie Task Force on Adolescent Education Report (Koerner, 1989), Chairman David Hornbeck responded to the question "How about tracking? What would schools replace it with?" Middle level school principals should consider how to best accommodate his following response:

> One of the generically best strategies is what has come to be called cooperative learning. There are various versions of that but it basically revolves around high achieving youngsters helping those youngsters who are not achieving as well. One of the most popular forms of it is peer tutoring. An essential component to any effort to eliminate tracking depends upon staff development activities where teachers learn how to use alternative strategies. (p. 69)

Teachers will need extensive education in the area of cooperative learning and make decisions about the skills that will best prepare them to implement it. The works of Kagan (1988), Johnson and Johnson (1987), Slavin et al. (1985), and Slavin (1986b), among others, emphasize the importance of skill development by teachers to fully utilize collaborative learning for better student learning in heterogeneous circumstances.

Principals should examine how colleagues in area schools are implementing heterogeneous grouping practices to identify effective staff development activities that have facilitated effective implementation. Principals can share individuals who have developed these skills.

Individuals who have attended different training programs can help organize staff development activities in other districts. Using the "turn-key" principle can prepare other inservice leaders within and among networking middle level schools. Inservice activities should take advantage of "jigsaw" and other cooperative learning techniques teachers have found effective in developing heterogeneously grouped procedures. Peer coaching approaches can also assist middle level school personnel in developing and refining cooperative learning skills used to implement successful heterogeneously grouped classroom arrangements.

## Conclusion

Heterogeneous grouping arrangements in middle level classrooms can provide opportunities for students to master particular activities and materials in lessons and instructional units. Teachers must learn how to assign students to

small (3 to 5) heterogeneous mixed and somewhat long-term cooperative learning groups. Cooperative learning activities can develop positive interdependence as students work together and as members of a learning group become responsible for individual growth and for each other.

Properly implemented, cooperative learning develops constructive peer learning in a safer psychological environment than in the class at large. Total competition is replaced by collaboration in smaller settings within the class. Practice is encouraged in an invitational setting. Supportive collaboration allows learning to proceed and mistakes to be corrected without fear of negative judgment by the class or the teacher.

Cooperative learning approaches in more heterogeneously grouped classes allow students across the ability spectrum to learn better at their own rates. This cannot be accomplished unless teachers develop and understand the "how" of skills needed to deliver such programs.

The leadership task of middle level school principals is to move toward the proven results of such programs (Slavin, 1989/90). This will require local study and definition among the school community and within the professional staff. To move toward such learning success for young adolescents requires that principals and staff members collaborate in developing a timeline to deliver the skills necessary for success in more heterogeneously grouped middle level school programs.

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*Schools in the Middle* is a publication of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1904 Association Dr., Reston, Va. 22091. Individual subscriptions are not available. Additional copies may be ordered: single copies, $1.50 each; 2-10 copies, $1 each; 11-99 copies, 85¢ each; 100 or more, 75¢. Payment must accompany orders of $15 or less.

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